



Minister of State

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30 June 1981

My dear Bishop,

I was, as I said at our meetings on 23 and 26 June, glad to have the chance to talk to you and your fellow Members of the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace about the Commission's statement of 3 June.

The Government are grateful to the Commission for the efforts which it has made and continues to make to secure a resolution of the hunger strike at the Maze Prison. The Government for its part fully shares the concern which the Commission has like many men of goodwill expressed, that the hunger strike should end.

At our meeting we had a constructive discussion of the changes which you suggested might reasonably be made to the regime at the Maze Prison for prisoners who are prepared to accept the authority of the Prison Governor were the hunger strike and associated protest to end. From our side the discussion was on the basis that the Government will not concede to anyone other than the Prison Authorities control over what happens in the Prison, nor grant any group of prisoners a special privileged status on the basis of the motives they claim for the acts which brought them to Prison in the first place. I understood you to accept that that was the Government's position. I believe the Commission also understand that, in our view, the so-called five demands are intended to secure precisely what we cannot give.

The three specific suggestions concerning clothing, association and prison work made in the Commission's statement of 3 June do not in the

form in which they are expressed conflict with the Government's principles. But equally the Commission's expressed proposals might be interpreted as embracing in full the corresponding demands of the prisoners. It is therefore of vital importance that there should be no ambiguity in the Government's position, all the more so as the prisoners are alleged twice in the past ten days to have said that the Commission's proposals fall short of what would bring the protest to an end; we must be clear that what we are talking about is the bringing to an end of the protest and not merely the hunger strike.

It is for this reason that the Secretary of State is once again making the Government's position in general clear in a statement today, of which I enclose a copy.

A comparison of the Government's position with the statements attributed to the prisoners on 19 June and again on 28 June shows clearly that these attitudes cannot be reconciled. This is why the Government believes it would be wrong to make moves in advance of the ending of the hunger strike and simply in the hope that they would have this effect. In other words the Government is not prepared to give the protesters something on account in the hope that they would not present the rest of the bill later.

The Government would nevertheless like to set down for the record the specific questions you put to us in the two meetings to which I have referred, and our answers.

Segregation:

The Government cannot concede the principle that prisoners should decide with whom they mix or that they be segregated according to religious denomination or other factors. In practice common sense will dictate how the Prison Authorities will deploy prisoners day to day. It will be for them to decide what at any time will be the overriding consideration.

Controlled Association:

You asked whether, subject to the necessary considerations of control and security, prisoners in adjacent wings might be allowed to associate together during the period when association is normally permitted to non-protesting prisoners in the evenings and at weekends and during recreation in the exercise yard. This does present practical problems of controlling and supervising more movement, and larger groups, of prisoners: and the considerations mentioned would mean that such movement could not be through the central control areas of a block. Otherwise, the problems need not be overriding in the situation of normality which we assumed as the context of our discussions. But this assumption is important, since there is obvious scope for misuse of the increased association involved.

You also asked whether it would be possible from unlock to lock-up normally to leave cell doors unlocked. I have considered this and have to say that we would not find this possible in view of the men we are dealing with and the need to protect prison officers. In addition, many prisoners prefer the privacy afforded by the present arrangements.

Work:

You asked whether ex-protestors would be required to contribute in the same way as presently non-protesting prisoners to orderly work in the blocks and to analogous duties in the central facilities (such as kitchens and laundries) which serve the whole prison. You also asked whether ex-protestors would in practice have to engage in 'productive' work in prison industry. In principle we regard all prisoners as liable to allocation by the Prison Authorities to some prison activity. But I went on to explain that prison activities embraced a spectrum from the essential functions needed to maintain the prison through 'productive' activities and activities which benefit primarily the prisoners, and that there are areas where the one shades into the other. There are obvious attractions in increasing the proportion of time which prisoners spend in useful activities that are also congenial to them, and to offering the widest practicable choice. But we cannot



agree that any group of prisoners should as of right opt out of a particular form of activity, since what matters to us is that in practice the Prison Authorities decide what prisoners actually do.

Remission:

The Government is prepared, in accordance with its previous statement to be generous about restoring lost remission on an individual basis and subject to continuing good conduct in circumstances in which the whole protest has come to an end. But it would be wrong to imagine that that restoration would immediately be total or be given without an appropriate period of evidence of continuing good behaviour.

Clothing:

The problems involved in letting the prisoners wear their own clothes all the time relate to security and control. As such they are of a different order from those considered under the other heads above in that they are not, in the Government's perception, problems of the prisoners' status or the day-to-day authority of the Prison Governor.

I do urge you to study closely the Secretary of State's statement and particularly the closing two paragraphs. I am also sending you, in case you do not have it, a copy of the document on the NI Prison Regime. I wanted to draw your attention to those other aspects of the regime mentioned in it and not perhaps so widely known: it is possible, for example, for prisoners to keep closely in touch with what is going on outside the prison through their access to TV, radio and to periodicals and books - I see no difficulty over the Irish Bible which you mention. The arrangements for leave, both compassionate and at particular periods of the year, are also generous and above all, of interest to the families of the men as well as the men themselves.

Yours sincerely
Michael Allison

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